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Towards improved emergency responses: synthesis of UNICEF evaluations of humanitarian action 2010–2016

Executive summary**

Summary

Around the world, more than half a billion children live in countries affected by conflict and disasters. In too many parts of the world, children and young people have been caught up in emergencies that have put their lives and well-being at risk and, all too often, have taken those young lives. UNICEF plays a major role in the efforts of the international community to address humanitarian emergencies. UNICEF expenditure on humanitarian assistance in 2016 constituted nearly half of the organization's total expenditure at the country level.

In recent years, UNICEF has worked hard to improve the support and services it provides to the children and communities affected by emergencies. Evaluations have contributed to these efforts and have helped UNICEF to learn lessons and improve its capacity to respond quickly and effectively to emergencies. In the period 2016–2017, the UNICEF Evaluation Office synthesized 30 humanitarian evaluations undertaken from 2010 to 2016. The report tells an encouraging story of progress and improvement. UNICEF is shown to have learned from experience and adapted its approach in order to become faster and more effective, while contributing to the wider reforms of the humanitarian system. Important results have been achieved for children through work in key sectors and across many locations. However, several areas of weakness remain, and the report draws conclusions and makes recommendations intended to support further improvements in the organization's approach and performance at a time when the world faces immense humanitarian challenges.

* E/ICEF/2018/1.

** The executive summary of the evaluation report is being circulated in all official languages. The full report is available in English from the UNICEF Evaluation Office website (see annex).

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I. Introduction

1. The past decade has seen unprecedented change in the humanitarian landscape. Concurrent complex and protracted emergencies have resulted in vastly increased numbers of vulnerable children. In the 1990s, during any given year, approximately 66 million children lived in countries affected by armed conflict, violence, disaster and chronic crises. In 2016, that number rose to an estimated 535 million — nearly a quarter of the world's children.[1] It is estimated that by 2018 half the world's poor will live in fragile situations.[2]

2. At the same time, the global humanitarian system has changed radically. Following the identification of weaknesses[3] in the international response to emergencies in 2010, the humanitarian system has sought stronger leadership, greater coordination and increased accountability for humanitarian action. UNICEF, as a leading humanitarian actor, has played a critical role in these global humanitarian reforms.

3. Faced with rapidly increasing needs, the organization's humanitarian expenditure grew from just over $900 million in 2012 to $2.1 billion in 2015.[4] Such substantial expenditure has increased the organizational focus on improving systems and approaches for emergency preparedness and response. It has also intensified calls for UNICEF to prioritize learning from and being accountable for its humanitarian action.

4. The present synthesis report brings together the findings of 30 evaluations of humanitarian action. They span the period from 2010, when UNICEF underwent the formative experience of the Haiti earthquake and the Pakistan floods, through to 2016, when its responses to the Ebola and Central African Republic crises were evaluated.

5. The synthesis asks three questions:

(a) How has UNICEF performed with respect to humanitarian action from 2010 to 2016, and how has it improved over time?

(b) What factors have supported or constrained improvement?

(c) What can be learned and what improvements can be made for the future?

6. The synthesis, which updates a similar exercise conducted in 2013, is aimed at supporting accountability, contributing to learning and helping UNICEF to realize its humanitarian objectives for the vulnerable children it serves.

II. Arrangement of UNICEF for humanitarian action

7. Although reforms to the humanitarian system began in 2005, the year 2010 was a watershed for the humanitarian community. Emergency responses to crises in Haiti and Pakistan exposed critical flaws and gaps in the coordination of large, complex emergencies. The collective experience triggered the Transformative Agenda, which insituted major changes in the way humanitarian responses were implemented, organized and arranged. In 2014, the Core

[1] UNICEF, "Nearly a quarter of the world's children live in conflict or disaster-stricken countries", UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children Report, 2017.

[2] Chandy, L., N. Ledlie and V. Penciakova, "The final countdown: prospects for ending extreme poverty by 2030" (interactive), April 24, 2013, Brookings Institution, Washington DC. Available from www.brookings.edu/research/interactives/2013/ending-extreme-poverty

[3] Grünewald, F. and A. Binder, "Inter-agency real-time evaluation in Haiti: 3 months after the earthquake", Groupe URD and Global Public Policy Institute, 2010.

[4] Source: UNICEF internal expenditure data.

Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability[5] was adopted by many humanitarian organizations.[6]

8. In June 2016, the World Humanitarian Summit addressed such topics as humanitarian financing; bridging the humanitarian-development divide; strengthening local ownership of responses; and accountability to affected populations (AAP). The Summit outcomes included the Grand Bargain on flexible and appropriate funding.

9. At the same time, UNICEF undertook its own corporate reform process. In 2010, it published its revised Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action (CCC),[7] which form the central programmatic framework for its humanitarian action. Based upon international human rights, in particular the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and international humanitarian law, the CCC's define operational commitments for UNICEF-led humanitarian action. They can be applied in acute and protracted humanitarian situations, and their sector-specific programme commitments define minimum achievements to be realized for all children affected by an emergency. The CCCs are designed to support wider inter-agency cluster coordination.

10. Other reforms, enacted in particular following a critical evaluation of the UNICEF response to the Haiti emergency in 2010,[8] included:

(a) The reinstatement of the fast-track recruitment process for emergencies, the absence of which severely constrained scale-up in Haiti;[9]

(b) New structures for emergency response, with the overall framework provided by the Corporate Emergency Activation Procedure, introduced in March 2011,[10] and including the Simplified Standard Operating Procedures (SSOPs) for Level 3 emergencies;[11]

(c) The introduction of Humanitarian Performance Monitoring (HPM) indicators to enable the systematic corporate measurement of emergency responses.

11. The Strengthening Humanitarian Action initiative, carried out in 2013 and 2014, refined these new systems. Examples of changes include:

(a) New guidance on cluster coordination, preparedness and children and armed conflict;

(b) Strengthened humanitarian leadership training;

(c) A more formalized emergency recruitment system.

12. In 2013, Level 2 SSOPs were introduced to address large-scale emergencies that remain below the Level 3 threshold. The Level 3 SSOPs were revised in 2015 after the conclusion

[5] The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability sets out nine commitments that organizations and individuals involved in humanitarian response can use to improve the quality and effectiveness of the assistance they provide. The standard was devised to clarify the responsibilities of aid workers, simplify the implementation of humanitarian standards and contribute to better humanitarian responses.

[6] UNICEF committed to the Core Humanitarian Standard at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016.

[7] UNICEF, *Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action*, 2010.

[8] UNICEF, Independent review of UNICEF's operational response to the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, 2011.

[9] Enrico Leonardi, Jessica Alexander, and David Bassiouni, "Review of the fast track recruitment process", UNICEF Division of Human Resources, 2013.

[10] Executive Directive CF/EXD/2011-001, 21 March 2011, "UNICEF's Corporate Emergency Activation Procedure".

[11] Executive Directive CF/EXD/2012-001, 1 March 2012, "Simplified StandardOperating Procedures (SSOPs) pertaining to UNICEF's Corporate EmergencyActivation Procedure".

of the Strengthening Humanitarian Action initiative. Since their development, these strengthened procedures have been tested in many different emergencies, including in conflict-related crises in the Central African Republic and South Sudan in 2013; the natural disaster of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in the same year; the insurgency faced by Iraq from 2014; and in the complex and protracted Syrian Arab Republic regional emergency, which has continued since 2011. The application of the new procedures in these different situations has generated much experience and learning.

III. UNICEF evaluative coverage of humanitarian action

13. In addition to evaluation, UNICEF assesses its humanitarian action by means of lessons learned and reviews.[12] However, with its dual emphasis on accountability and learning, evaluation can offer an especially rigorous evidence base. This section of the report describes the evaluative coverage of UNICEF humanitarian action between 2010 and 2016.

14. The institutional systems of UNICEF suggest "triggers" to evaluate its humanitarian action. According to the 2013 Evaluation Policy, the triggers include scale (when responding to major humanitarian emergencies) and/or expenditure (when more than $10 million is spent per programme outcome component). Level 3 SSOPs also integrate evaluation as part of the programme cycle.

15. UNICEF-commissioned evaluations covering topics from preparedness through response and recovery comprised 76 out of 623 evaluations or evaluative documents produced between 2010 and 2016.[13] Twelve large humanitarian evaluations covered more than half — 53 per cent ($1.57 billion) — of the total humanitarian expenditure on Level 2 and Level 3 responses ($3 billion), thus covering a significant portion of UNICEF expenditures.

Summary

16. Most sectors have been well explored, with education being the most prominent in stand-alone sector-specific evaluations. Health has been, for the most part, well covered in multisector evaluations. The only "pure" health emergency in the reviewed period was the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, which was addressed by a stand-alone evaluation.

17. The 76 evaluations of humanitarian action were undertaken across all seven regions in which UNICEF engages. They addressed six of the seven sectors in the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2014-2017,[14] with just over half covering multisector humanitarian responses. Emergencies linked to natural disasters were the most-evaluated type of emergency, followed by those associated with conflict. A substantial proportion of humanitarian evaluations also covered global approaches or emergency-related systems.

18. Perhaps because of the triggers for evaluation, all the Level 3 responses and most Level 2 responses since 2012 have been evaluated, either by an inter-agency or UNICEF-specific study.[15] Most of these evaluations were commissioned centrally, rather than by country or

[12] To ensure that the synthesis of evaluations was balanced by such complementary evidence, a separate synthesis of non-evaluative work has served to validate the present analysis. The non-evaluative work provided knowledge of a more operational nature than that found in formal evaluations.

[13] The evaluation count of all reports published in the UNICEF Evaluation and Research Database was taken in November 2016.

[14] Excluding HIV/AIDS in emergencies, for which no evaluation was available.

[15] An inter-agency humanitarian evaluation of the Iraq response was planned, but has been suspended. Emergencies in the Nigeria region and in Yemen were evaluated recently, but the reports were not released in time to be included in the present synthesis. The Level 2 response to the storms in the Pacific Islands has not been formally evaluated.

regional offices. Thus, the bulk of humanitarian action taking place below the Level 2 and Level 3 classifications remains unevaluated. In spite of the corporate triggers, UNICEF is reliant upon the willingness and ability of country and regional offices to undertake the evaluation of humanitarian action.

19. The synthesis concluded that UNICEF could gain substantial added value by linking up responses in closely related sectors in the same crisis. For example, two evaluations of emergency response in Jordan were conducted in 2015, covering two interrelated sectors (education and child protection). Neither references the other, nor makes explicit any connections to closely related sectors.

20. The evaluations considered in the synthesis did not systematically address the CCCs, as they did not in the 2013 synthesis, nor did they analyse adherence to international humanitarian principles,[16] as was also noted by the United Nations Evaluation Group in its 2016 working paper "Reflecting humanitarian principles in evaluation".

IV. Conduct of the synthesis and limitations

21. The present synthesis has been developed from a selection of 30 evaluations out of a wider pool of 76 evaluations on the basis of the following criteria:

(a) Only documents with a strongly evaluative approach were included. This excluded, for example, reviews, research reports and other material, such as lessons learned documents;

(b) Only reports receiving at least a "satisfactory" rating according to the UNICEF quality assurance mechanism for evaluations[17] were included, to ensure that evidence was sufficiently valid and reliable.

22. Two other forms of evidence provided triangulation:

(a) Inter-agency humanitarian evaluations, which provide evidence of the system- wide response, but do not report on UNICEF performance specifically;[18]

(b) The 2017 report "Learning from humanitarian action: a synthesis of non-evaluative documents on UNICEF's humanitarian action from 2010–2016", which brings together evidence from reviews and other relevant sources.

23. The 30 evaluations cover all major emergencies to which UNICEF has responded since 2010, excluding those in Iraq, South Sudan and the Horn of Africa, which were addressed or intended to be addressed through inter-agency evaluations.

Process

24. The 30 evaluations were systematically reviewed, with the consistent extraction of key findings ensured by the application of an analytical framework[19] including the evaluation criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and coordination as well as other areas of analytical interest. A second-layer quality assessment for individual data elements was then applied. Evidence was rated for validity and reliability on a scale of 1 (low) to 4

[16] Humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

[17] The UNICEF Global Evaluation Reports Oversight System; details available from unicef.org/evaluation/index_GEROS.html.

[18] Conducted to date for the Central African Republic, Typhoon Haiyan and South Sudan crises.

[19] See annex 2 of the full synthesis report "Towards improved emergency responses: synthesis of UNICEF evaluations of humanitarian action 2010–2016" for further details on the methodology.

(high), with only reliable evidence — scoring at least 2 — included. This approach allowed the strength of evidence underlying each finding to be made explicit.

Table 1
Characteristics of included evaluations

Key characteristics	*Number of evaluations*
Evaluation of global operational systems	3
Evaluation of global approaches or key humanitarian functions of UNICEF	4
Evaluation of multi-country responses	5
Evaluation of single-country responses	18
Total	**30**

Limitations

25. The main limitations of the synthesis are: (a) its reliance on evidence from its component evaluations; and (b) its reference period of 2010 to 2016, which restricts the illustration of corporate changes within UNICEF that are not yet reflected in evaluations. Nonetheless, the breadth and depth of the evidence base — 30 high-quality evaluations conducted over a six-year period — enable the synthesis to provide an accurate reflection of the performance of UNICEF in humanitarian action between 2010 and 2016.

V. Findings

A. Relevance of UNICEF humanitarian action to humanitarian needs

Limited prioritization of needs assessments within humanitarian action

26. Despite evidence of UNICEF advocacy within United Nations country teams for multi-cluster initial rapid assessment (MIRA), the evaluations reflected continuing deficiencies in its swift implementation. The 2013 synthesis identified weaknesses in UNICEF needs assessments, specifically, finding that they did not take place, were incomplete or provided only general situation analyses.

27. In 2017, needs assessment was the focus of 14 out of 30 evaluations; 4 of these evaluations praised the UNICEF prioritization of needs assessments.[20] However, 10 out of 14 evaluations found gaps or limitations in needs assessment:

(a) In the response to the Nepal earthquake in 2015, UNICEF failed to convince the international community to implement MIRA, but instead of conducting its own assessments, it relied on limited government data. A similar critique was made of the response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (2013–2014);

(b) Caseload analyses were insufficiently detailed. Although in some instances, caseload estimations were based upon Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions surveys, these provide only a very broad picture of needs, as the evaluation of the Sahel food and nutrition crisis response points out;

[20] Two corporate initiatives: the Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy programme and the Rapid Response to Population Movements initiative in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; and two emergency responses: to the cholera outbreak in Haiti (2010–2015) and the nutrition crisis in Somalia (2011–2012).

(c) There were gaps in consultations with affected communities, e.g., during the Sahel food crisis (2010–2011); in the response to Typhoon Haiyan (2013–2014); and in the Central African Republic (2013–2015).

Strong alignment with humanitarian needs

28. Despite these gaps, the majority of relevant evaluations (18 out of 27) found the UNICEF programme responses to be broadly aligned with humanitarian needs. However, 9 out of 27 evaluations identified opportunity-based rather than needs-based programming. This occurred in at least four major emergencies spanning 2010 to 2016: the Sahel crisis (2010–2011); the Central African Republic (2013–2015); some elements of the Typhoon Haiyan response in 2013; and the response to the Syrian Arab Republic regional emergency (2011–2015).

29. Three evaluations also found coverage gaps. In the North Yemen and Sahel crises (2010–2011), programme responses did not address all the needs that fell within the UNICEF purview. During the Ebola outbreak in West and Central Africa (2014–2015), the UNICEF response neither promptly nor adequately addressed the serious secondary humanitarian consequences of Ebola for the protection, general health and education of children.

B. Appropriateness of the strategies or designs used for UNICEF humanitarian action

Mixed picture, but willingness to adapt

30. Programme strategies or designs were found to be appropriate in just under half of the evaluations that assessed country- or regional-level responses, although UNICEF showed a willingness and ability to adapt when necessary. Examples include:

(a) A calculated risk to apply a cash and vouchers response to the Horn of Africa drought in Somalia in the period 2011–2012 paid off: markets responded and people could buy needed food at reasonable prices;

(b) In Pakistan, in response to a large public hygiene crisis following floods in 2011, UNICEF chose a development-focused approach geared to longer-term behaviour change, which addressed underlying vulnerabilities more sustainably than short-term relief would have;

(c) In the North Yemen (2010) and Rwanda (2012–2013) crises, incorrect assumptions made at the outset were course-corrected quickly in response to the reality on the ground.

Weak strategic frameworks or designs

31. Of the 14 evaluations that identified weaknesses, the main concern related to a limited or absent strategic framework at the outset. For example:

(a) In the Central African Republic, the UNICEF approach (in common with the wider United Nations response)[21] was characterized as reactive, ad hoc planning in emergency mode, rather than being based upon a strategic vision with medium- to longer-term goals;

[21] Inter-agency humanitarian evaluation, Central African Republic, 2016.

(b) In the Syrian Arab Republic regional crisis, UNICEF lacked an initial strategy to link systematic situation analysis and needs and vulnerability assessments with programme decisions.

32. The evaluations also found that the assumptions made in design were often linked to weak needs assessments. For example, in the Typhoon Haiyan response of 2013, the UNICEF response of setting up child-friendly schools as the primary child protection response was based upon the assumption that such schools were unquestionably the most appropriate child protection response to an emergency. The evaluation found, however, that communities had articulated needs and priorities for which child-friendly schools were not the appropriate response.

C. Alignment of UNICEF humanitarian action with national priorities

Strong alignment with national priorities where conditions permitted

33. Twelve out of the 18 evaluations that assessed the alignment of UNICEF humanitarian action with national priorities found that UNICEF humanitarian action was well-aligned with national priorities, where conditions permitted. This was largely due to an explicit focus on alignment in design, e.g., in the response to the Nepal earthquake and Typhoon Haiyan. In Turkey, alignment was helped by strong national ownership of the humanitarian response to the Syrian Arab Republic regional crisis.

34. Six evaluations found weaknesses. These arose mainly from two gaps:

(a) Insufficient consideration of local systems, e.g., setting up child-friendly schools in the Philippines during the Typhoon Haiyan response and in support of Syrian child refugees in Jordan, which were in competition with local schools or early childhood care;

(b) Delinking from relevant national mechanisms or policies, particularly where these were institutionally weak, e.g., the national systems for food security and nutrition during the Sahel crisis or, more recently, national priorities for health-systems strengthening, which became overwhelmed during the Ebola crisis.

D. Alignment of UNICEF humanitarian action with key international principles

Limited evidence and context-based challenges in alignment with the international humanitarian principles and the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action

35. The only three evaluations to assess the international humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity[22] raise familiar dilemmas. They point to challenges for UNICEF with regard to the need to align its response with that of national authorities, while meeting the needs of affected populations. Evaluations of UNICEF responses in Nepal and the Syrian Arab Republic voice this concern, as does the evaluation of the UNICEF cluster lead agency role.

36. Just 10 of the 30 evaluations systematically assessed the CCCs. Three of these[23] found UNICEF humanitarian action to be well aligned with the CCCs, while the remaining seven evaluations found a mixed picture or gaps. All seven argue for greater contextualization of

[22] See https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM-humanitarianprinciples_eng_June12.pdf.

[23] The response to the Nepal earthquake, the provision of psychosocial support for Syrian children in Jordan and the UNICEF Supply Division's emergency response.

the CCCs to the different emergency types currently faced by UNICEF and other international actors, including slow-onset crises; crises with strong protection dimensions, such as in the Syrian Arab Republic regional crisis; protracted emergencies; or public health emergencies, such as the Ebola epidemic.

E. Performance of UNICEF humanitarian action against intended targets

Mixed performance in achieving results

37. As in the 2013 synthesis, around half of the evaluations of UNICEF humanitarian action contained solid evidence of results. The objectives of UNICEF and/or the output and outcome targets for the interventions were also met or exceeded in half of the evaluations, with the remaining half finding moderate or mixed performance. Most evaluations reported on output targets, applying HPM indicators, and 13 of those indicated that the output targets were met or exceeded.

38. Some evaluations found overall positive achievement against objectives, but mixed performance within various programmatic areas. For example, in the response to Typhoon Haiyan, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), education and health interventions performed well against intended targets, but nutrition and child protection initiatives struggled to meet their targets, in part due to the overestimation of the number of children to be reached, and no subsequent adjustments of the caseloads.

Significant outcome-level gains

39. Evaluations also recorded some significant outcome-level results arising either as a direct result of UNICEF interventions (attribution) or with UNICEF interventions playing a significant role (contribution). These include:

(a) The reduction of disease prevalence and the prevention of further infection in Haiti in 2013; during the Typhoon Haiyan response in 2013; and in the Somalia (2011), Ebola (2014–2015) and Nepal (2015) responses;

(b) Changes in community behaviour as a consequence of the Ebola response;

(c) Children returned to their families and children going back to school after the Nepal earthquake (2015);

(d) The release of children and reunification in several child protection interventions in emergencies.

F. National and local capacity built by UNICEF humanitarian action

Strong results in systems strengthening

40. A key achievement of UNICEF humanitarian action, identified in both the 2013 and 2017 syntheses, has been the successful strengthening of national and local systems for emergency preparedness and response. National-level capacity gains due to UNICEF interventions were identified in 10 evaluations and local-level improvements in 12. Two main factors enabled these achievements: (a) the embedding of a strong systems-building approach from the start, e.g., in the Central African Republic and within the Peacebuilding Education and Advocacy programme; and/or (b) the adoption of active approaches to support the national ownership of initiatives, e.g., in Nepal and North Yemen.

41. Fifteen evaluations found that the intended results were not achieved. The reasons for this include:

(a) Technical weaknesses in the design of the intervention;

(b) Coverage limitations, particularly for nutrition, WASH and education interventions, where UNICEF did not always work in all areas of need;

(c) Overly ambitious targets, such as in the Syrian Arab Republic, where implementation was also dependent upon partner capacity;

(d) Delivery of short-term results, but limited long-term effects, e.g., in child-friendly schools in the Philippines (2014) and Liberia (2013);

(e) The need for a more structured, less ad hoc approach to working with Governments, e.g., in the Philippines during Typhoon Haiyan and in the Syrian Arab Republic regional crisis.

C. Timeliness of the UNICEF humanitarian response

External factors have impeded timeliness

42. External factors that have hindered the speed of the UNICEF (and the international) response include late national and international declarations of non-sudden onset crises, such as in the Syrian Arab Republic regional conflict, and the late recognition of emergencies by other key international actors, as in the Ebola crisis in West Africa. Underfunding and delays in donor funding and the unavailability of pooled funding mechanisms have also constrained quick responses on the ground.

Mixed performance in timeliness continues

43. Both the 2013 and 2017 syntheses found mixed timeliness with regard to the UNICEF humanitarian response. Seven of the 22 evaluations analysed in 2017 found the overall response to be timely. The revised Level 2 and Level 3 SSOPs have been a major contributory factor here, with benefits — applied across emergency responses —that include:

(a) The rapid deployment of immediate response teams;

(b) The fast-tracking of human resource and recruitment processes;

(c) Swift procurement processes;

(d) The fast-tracking of other administrative requirements.

44. However, seven evaluations found some staff reluctant to apply the new SSOPs, particularly given financial accountability risks relating to Programme Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with partners. This reluctance delayed the processing of up to five months of agreements during the Typhoon Haiyan disaster, the Syrian Arab Republic regional emergency and the Central African Republic crisis.

45. Slower-than-necessary responses, found in 15 of the 22 evaluations, related mostly to a slow start-up that gained momentum, such as in the Syrian Arab Republic regional response, or a swift start-up that encountered delays once the immediate response was under way, e.g., in the response to the Van-Ercis earthquake in Turkey (2011) and the Mali crisis (2012).

H. Cost-effectiveness of the UNICEF humanitarian response

Costs reasonable for the response

46. For the 14 humanitarian evaluations that had information available, the majority (10 out of 14) found costs to be reasonable for the response. Evaluations identified some strong efforts to produce efficiency gains, such as in Jordan, where the cost of psychosocial support per child was reduced by almost half. Both evaluations that assessed the cost-effectiveness of cash transfers in emergencies (Nepal earthquake and Somalia) found high levels of cost-efficiency.

Weaknesses arising from context

47. Weaknesses in cost-efficiency were specific to context, including expensive sanitation solutions during the cholera outbreak in Haiti and high transaction costs with implementing partners during the Typhoon Haiyan response.

I. Connectedness of UNICEF interventions to other UNICEF operations in the country

Suspension of existing country programmes to address emergencies

48. Under the UNICEF Level 2 and Level 3 emergency procedures, if a sudden-onset crisis occurs, country programmes can be suspended in order to direct resources towards immediate needs. All sudden-onset emergencies assessed for this synthesis report (Typhoon Haiyan and the earthquakes in Haiti and Nepal) resulted in the suspension of the existing UNICEF country programmes.

Weak links from emergency to development programmes

49. Ten evaluations assessed links to country operations. Nine of these found a lack of connection between emergency responses and country (often development-oriented) programmes, e.g., in the responses to the Central African Republic emergency and Typhoon Haiyan. In these situations, the roles of country office staff were left unclear and sometimes bypassed during the emergency. As well as complicating coordination on the ground, this left a difficult legacy for the country office once the emergency was over.

J. Extent of the linkage of UNICEF humanitarian action to transition

External factors hindered links to transition and resilience

50. The evaluations identified a range of external factors that hindered planning for transition and resilience, including (a) a lack of external funding for post-emergency recovery efforts, e.g., in the Central African Republic and Ebola crises; (b) the inability to "flex" donor funding streams from development to emergency and vice-versa; and (c) unclear policy guidance on early recovery and transition within the CCCs, as the Nepal earthquake evaluation pointed out.

Room for improvement in linking emergency response to transition

51. Overall, 17 out of the 20 evaluations found that UNICEF had not yet successfully integrated links to transition, even during more recent crises, such as the responses to the Syrian Arab Republic regional crisis and the Ebola emergency. Lessons identified by the evaluations include:

(a) The importance of preparedness, and particularly the ability to flex programming and capacities from development to emergency and vice-versa;

(a) Where plans are present, the need for overall consistency, with variation among sector plans;

(b) The need to seize opportunities to address social change.

(c) The need to participate in national assessments and planning for recovery and reconstruction;

(d) The importance of moving from emergency to transition as soon as conditions permit;

(e) The need for clarity regarding the process of exit from emergency procedures and related processes, such as the withdrawal of the immediate response team.

K. Integration of UNICEF humanitarian action across sectors

Limited integration of humanitarian action

52. The UNICEF structure of distinct programme sections, mirroring the sectoral division of the CCCs, does not facilitate cross-sectoral links. Only two of the evaluations analysed found well-integrated responses and three noted gradual improvements over time. Weak integration arose mainly from:

(a) Needs assessments that were insufficiently holistic to set the basis for a better integrated response;

(b) A lack of inter-sectional planning and preparedness, including of the integration of actions with common objectives to avoid supply-driven responses, identified in 11 evaluations;

(c) A lack of internal operational coordination, identified in 11 evaluations, sometimes despite strong planning within documentation;

(d) Siloed approaches by sector at the regional office, which also influenced country office implementation.

L. Coherence of UNICEF humanitarian action in relation to that of partners operating in the humanitarian context

Coherence is fundamental to the operating modalities of UNICEF

53. UNICEF is the cluster lead or co-lead at the global and country levels for the WASH, education and nutrition clusters, and leads the area of responsibility for child protection. Coherence is therefore an integral part of its operating modalities.

Strong coherence with strategic response plans and national government plans

54. The evaluations found the strategic planning of UNICEF to be mostly coherent with strategic response plans at the country level. The strongest area of partnership was with national Government or authorities. In Turkey, for example, UNICEF applied its close working relationship with the Ministry of Education to help widen access for the education component of its response to previously inaccessible host communities. During the Typhoon Haiyan response, UNICEF signed memorandums of understanding with 40 local government units in affected areas of the Philippines in which it had not worked previously.

Mixed experience in partnerships with other United Nations agencies, but effective cluster leadership

55. The evaluations found some weaknesses in partnerships with other United Nations agencies. These arose in part from a systemic lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities, e.g., in the initial phases of the Syrian Arab Republic regional response. The UNICEF cluster leadership at the country level was found to be broadly effective, although roles at the regional and global levels were not always clear.

Non-governmental organizations mostly assessed as implementing partners

56. Partnerships with non-governmental organizations have generally been regarded as implementing partnerships and discussed in relation to the activation of PCAs. The importance of standby partnerships as part of emergency preparedness is emphasized in the Nepal evaluation,[24] which found no standby or contingency PCAs in place.

Willingness to engage with non-traditional partners

57. Several evaluations found innovative engagement with non-traditional partners, including peace committees, religious institutions and conflict mediation groups. Collaboration with the private sector was commended in the evaluations of the rapid response to population movements in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the emergency cash transfer programme in Somalia.

Lessons regarding UNICEF partnerships

58. Lessons documented by the evaluations include:

(a) The need for an explicit partnership strategy, rather than an ad hoc approach, including how government or national authority capacity should be developed or maintained;

(b) The need to recognize, in contracting with large international organizations, that they work through local implementing partners, adding an additional administrative layer and incurring a degree of risk.

M. Integration of UNICEF cross-cutting issues into humanitarian action

Inconsistent attention to equity, protection and accountability to affected populations

(a) Equity: The 2013 synthesis found inconsistent attention to equity, linked to limited needs assessment, in UNICEF humanitarian action. The 2017 synthesis had similar findings: 7 out of 17 evaluations found that UNICEF humanitarian action had successfully integrated equity concerns. However, 10 evaluations found that the issue lacked systematic attention, leading to a range of specific equity gaps, identified when the UNICEF response was evaluated as a whole. Gender (in five responses), age (in two) and disability (in six) were identified as the main equity gaps;

(b) Protection: UNICEF has issued its own minimum standards for child protection in emergencies as part of the CCCs. However, it relies heavily upon other partners to support a wider protective environment.[25] The limited evidence available found inconsistent treatment of the issue. UNICEF took a strongly proactive approach to

[24] Volker Hahn, "Learning from humanitarian action: a synthesis of non-evaluative documents on UNICEF's humanitarian action from 2010–2016", internal unpublished document, 2017.

[25] See www.unicef.org/protection/57929_62178.html.

protection in the Central African Republic, but five evaluations found weaknesses, including in the Nepal earthquake response and the Syrian refugee response in Turkey;

(c) Accountability to affected populations: The evaluations found that UNICEF has not yet systematically integrated AAP practices into its humanitarian action overall. Of the 16 evaluations undertaken after the Inter-Agency Standing Committee endorsed the Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations, in December 2011,[26] only 5 found UNICEF to have fully or gradually implemented AAP commitments.

N. Institutional factors affecting UNICEF humanitarian action

Institutional factors identified

59. The synthesis identified evidence of common institutional characteristics or systems positively and negatively affecting UNICEF humanitarian action. These are summarized in table 2.

Table 2
Institutional factors

Factor	*Supported*	*Constrained*
Emergency preparedness	Has supported responses where present, as in Nepal	
Regional-country coordination	Level 2 and Level 3 procedures have supported timely immediate responses, including support from the regional office	Different interpretations of the Simplified Standard Operating Procedures at the country level have at times impeded efficiency and effectiveness
Management/staffing/ human resources, including surge mechanisms	Has been supported by Level 2 and Level 3 procedures, which have enabled, for example regional surge rosters	Commonly reported as a major constraint, with staffing gaps prominent in several emergency responses
Supply and logistics	Has supported the efficiency and effectiveness of responses	Weak or inconsistent end-use monitoring identified
Performance measurement of humanitarian action	Has supported the consistency of performance measurement across different response types	There is a need for increased context specificity, particularly in the varying types of emergency UNICEF now faces
Communications and advocacy	Have played key roles in both awareness and funding for the crisis, and have also made a substantive contribution in, for example, the Ebola crisis	Lacking staff capacity at times

Mixed evidence of attention to preparedness

60. Preparedness is a corporate commitment under the CCCs. Ten evaluations comment (explicitly or implicitly) on preparedness issues. Three found UNICEF to be well prepared to engage in humanitarian action. Where preparedness was assessed as insufficient (7 out of 10 evaluations), lessons include:

(a) Preparedness plans should be current, regularly updated, concrete and tangible;

[26] Available from https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/accountability-affected-populations-including-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse.

(b) Plans should scale up well, even in major emergencies;

(c) Plans should address relationships and the working arrangements with government partners;

(d) PCAs require emergency clauses;

(e) Offices should have dedicated staff responsible for emergency preparedness and response.

Strong regional-country office coordination

61. Eight evaluations praise the role of the UNICEF regional offices in supporting the internal coordination of humanitarian action. Specific contributions included:

(a) Joint fundraising;

(b) Supply and logistics support;

(c) The provision of surge capacity;

(d) General technical assistance;

(e) Communication, advocacy and donor relations;

(f) Research support and/or lesson sharing.

Progress on staffing for emergencies, but with challenges remaining

62. Seventeen of the 30 evaluations, as well as non-evaluative material,[27] comment upon UNICEF management, staffing and human resources for emergencies. Positively, evaluations found that the Level 2 or Level 3 SSOPs have supported the swift mobilization of surge human resources, as in the Sahel, Nepal and Typhoon Haiyan disasters and in the Central African Republic. A 2012 review of the fast-track recruitment process found the mechanism to be effective in getting the right people with the right skills on the ground at the right time.

63. Nevertheless, the speedy and sustainable staffing of emergency operations remains challenging. Evaluations have found:

(a) An over-reliance on short-term deployments, limiting institutional memory in the responses in Yemen (2010), Rwanda (2014) and Turkey and Jordan (both evaluated in 2015);

(b) The ad hoc identification of human resources, e.g., in the Syrian Arab Republic regional crisis;

(c) A focus on programme staff to the detriment of administrative and budgetary functions, e.g., in the Mali response of 2013;

(d) An insufficient use of national staff in the Central African Republic in the period 2013–2014 and the Philippines in 2014.

Strong supply and logistics functions supporting efficient response

64. Eight evaluations comment on the UNICEF supply and logistics capacity in supporting humanitarian response. All eight found it to have positively affected the timeliness of the response, with supplies properly planned, pre-positioned and mobilized in time according to response plans. One remaining concern is the low frequency of end-user monitoring of

[27] Huls, "Learning from humanitarian action" (see footnote 24).

supplies, although this was assessed in only 5 out of the 30 evaluations. Of these five, only the Syrian Arab Republic regional response evaluation findings were positive, with the other four finding gaps or deficits with respect to end-user monitoring.

A need to revisit results measuring and reporting systems for emergencies

65. Since the Haiti earthquake of 2011, UNICEF has invested in a corporate system of HPM that establishes a set of common indicators linked to the CCCs, harmonizing progress reporting across different emergencies. Despite some significant progress, of 24 relevant evaluations, just 4 assessed the work of UNICEF positively, while the remaining 20 found challenges. Evaluations signaled a particular challenge regarding the HPM standard indicators, arguing for greater adaptability to context to better reflect the varying emergencies. Specifically, the evaluations of the crisis responses to the Nepal earthquake and in the Central African Republic and of the role of UNICEF as a cluster lead agency found that the HPM approach was too rigid or formal to meet fluid circumstances on the ground. For the Ebola response, the HPM approach was found to be unsuitable for a health emergency.[28]

66. Monitoring systems used to assess progress against HPM indicators were also found wanting. Evaluations found these systems to be:

(a) Incomplete or unrealistic in some contexts, e.g., the response to the floods in Pakistan (2013) or the Sahel food crisis (2012);

(b) Inconsistently implemented, e.g., in the Rwanda response (2014), in the Van-Ercis earthquake response in Turkey (2015) and during the Ebola outbreak (2014-2015);

(c) Too centralized, e.g., Manila during the Typhoon Haiyan response (2014), or running in parallel in different sectors, e.g., the Nepal earthquake response (2015);

(d) Challenging for partners, e.g., the child-friendly schools programme in the Philippines (2014) and the response to floods in Pakistan (2013).

67. Collectively, these deficiencies caused accountability shortcomings, limited the ability of UNICEF to report on performance and undermined its ability to make a clear, data-driven case for support.

Communications and advocacy supporting emergency response

68. Fourteen of the 30 evaluations praise UNICEF communication and advocacy in emergencies, with these playing substantive as well as process-support roles. Examples include the Sahel crisis, where social media was used for advocacy, and the Syrian Arab Republic regional crisis, where advocacy efforts helped to realize child rights. During the Ebola crisis, the use of communication for development approaches provided substantive gains in terms of community behaviour change.

VI. Conclusions

69. Overall, the 2017 synthesis of 30 evaluations of humanitarian action reflects an organization that has evolved considerably since the difficult learning experience of Haiti in 2010. New procedures have been implemented, new ways of working developed and learning generated and shared. Reforms to the wider humanitarian system, in which UNICEF has played a prominent role, are reflected in improvements in corporate and operational practice.

[28] A review has been conducted of the Humanitarian Performance Monitoring system (in draft at the time of writing).

70. In line with its fundamental ethos of ground-based action for children in emergencies, evaluations found the UNICEF humanitarian responses to be mostly relevant and aligned with humanitarian needs. Programming also aligns strongly, where feasible, with national responses, priorities and plans.

71. The evaluations found that UNICEF takes its responsibilities as humanitarian actor seriously, participating in joint responses to emergencies and prioritizing partnerships, although its connections with Government or national authorities are stronger than those with its partner United Nations agencies. UNICEF has also pragmatically embraced new relationships, such as with faith-based and religious groups, where these promise tangible humanitarian gains.

72. Overall, the evaluations documented here show some important results for children facing conflict and crisis. UNICEF has contributed to the reduced transmission of disease; helped to prevent hunger and undernutrition; and provided clean water and education to many vulnerable children. It has protected children in high-threat environments and built the capacity of local and national actors in humanitarian situations.

73. Yet some consistent weaknesses in UNICEF humanitarian action remain. Many of these were also reflected in the 2013 synthesis report. Specific areas identified by the evaluations as needing improvement are as follows:

(a) Needs assessments for affected populations, even under accessible conditions, are sometimes incomplete or too general. Consequently, opportunity-based, rather than needs-based programming, persists;

(b) Strategies and programme designs are sometimes weak, leading to a reactive rather than a proactive approach linked to such factors as limited preparedness, weak strategic frameworks (short term versus medium term) and/or weak needs assessments;

(c) AAP commitments have not been fully embraced or addressed, including the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability and broader commitments towards coordinated approaches for people-centred humanitarian action;

(d) The Level 2 and Level 3 SSOPs, while they have supported timely responses to sudden-onset crises, have failed to clarify synergies between the ongoing development efforts of country programmes and emergency response activities. This has left country teams uncertain of their role, at best, and, at worst, disenfranchised;

(e) Internal coherence remains limited, with an extremely sector-based approach impeding effectiveness and constraining results on the ground.

74. UNICEF has shown itself to be a conscientious adherent of international humanitarian principles. However, the evaluations also reflect the challenges and tensions faced by international actors working in complex governance environments while trying to ensure impartiality and independence. A more explicit position and rationale in specific operating contexts would benefit UNICEF here. Similarly, both the CCCs and the HPM indicators highlight the need for adaptable corporate-level frameworks that can encompass the specificities of context.

75. Evaluations found that UNICEF is still working to build clear links from humanitarian to development responses. The application of the Level 2 and Level 3 SSOPs has had a strong positive impact on the timeliness of responses. Their implications for existing country programmes and the progression to phase-out or robust transition planning, however, are still unclear.

76. Evaluations found evidence of a more risk-willing approach and an openness to innovation and experimentation. However, new procedures available to ease administrative burdens are not always applied by staff. A culture of confidence in their operational application remains to be built.

77. Finally, in its practical humanitarian action, UNICEF has not consistently adopted a proactive approach. Issues such as preparedness, transition planning and the implementation of AAP have not always kept pace with global shifts. While strategically UNICEF leads much of the humanitarian debate in its areas of expertise, playing leading roles in the cluster system and other global forums, evaluations reflect an organization evolving in response to, rather than ahead of, global change.

VII. Recommendations

78. On the basis of the evidence arising from these 30 evaluations of humanitarian action, this synthesis report makes seven recommendations for the future. These are aimed at helping UNICEF to improve its humanitarian action and more effectively and efficiently respond to the needs of the vulnerable children it serves.

1. More stringent requirements to evaluate

UNICEF has gathered a considerable body of evidence on its humanitarian action (76 evaluations since 2010). Its Evaluation Policy states that evaluations of humanitarian action will "usually be undertaken". Yet despite a set of corporate triggers, coverage remains unsystematic and patchy, particularly of Level 1 emergencies.

Action 1.1 UNICEF should consider setting more explicit triggers for its evaluation of humanitarian action. These should be explicitly defined by the Office of Emergency Programmes in discussion with the Evaluation Office. Dimensions could include: (a) spending (e.g., implementing the commitment in the present Evaluation Policy that an evaluation will usually be undertaken for a programme outcome area of over $10 million of expenditure); (b) duration of crisis (e.g., a two-year response); (c) strategic importance for the regional office; and (d) potential for wider lesson-learning for the organization.

2. The incorporation of needs into design

Evaluations found that UNICEF humanitarian action was often insufficiently grounded in needs assessment, even where such interventions were feasible. Programme designs require clearer links to needs.

Action 2.1 UNICEF programme designs for humanitarian responses should be required to clearly map the intended pathways from needs to intended results; justify the choices made in order to test assumptions; and avoid supply-driven responses, placing people and their evolving needs firmly at the centre. This should be a fundamental part of programme guidance;

Action 2.2 Performance monitoring strategies and plans for humanitarian action should clearly focus performance assessment on recording progress in responding to identified needs and to measuring adaptation as needs change;

Action 2.3 UNICEF should advocate, under the Grand Bargain process, for the humanitarian system to conduct lesson-learning on the experience of implementing needs assessments, including the challenges of the MIRA approach, and the need to invest in more detailed and granular needs assessments;

Action 2.4 Under the World Humanitarian Summit outcomes, AAP requires a more proactive, consistent and strategic approach. Meeting its commitments should be a fundamental requirement for all UNICEF humanitarian action, not a bonus.

3. Build a culture of confidence in procedures

Given its highly decentralized nature, guidance and procedures issued from the centre are only as influential as UNICEF country management and staff habits permit them to be. New protocols and procedures, such as the Level 2 and Level 3 SSOPs, need to be accompanied by capacity-development and training to build a risk-willing approach.

Action 3.1 UNICEF should conduct training and awareness-raising for staff and partners on the importance of applying Level 2 and Level 3 SSOPs during humanitarian emergencies, and particularly on commitments to speedy PCA processing. Concurrently, management should explicitly confirm the requirement for their implementation as part of the corporate procedures for humanitarian action. Where relevant, all evaluations should assess whether the SSOPs have been implemented as required;

Action 3.2 UNICEF should build awareness among its partners of its commitment to swift PCA processing under its Level 2 and Level 3 SSOPs. At the same time, it should clarify to partners the mechanisms by which they can hold UNICEF to account should these commitments not be met.

4. Intensify the approach to risk-informed programming within the localization agenda

The UNICEF decentralized structure means that it benefits from a vast cadre of national staff and partners, which provide it with a core capability to prepare for humanitarian action from a localized viewpoint. Under the Grand Bargain commitments, preparedness and risk identification should be approached from this perspective. Specific actions include:

Action 4.1 Planning: All relevant country programme documents should explicitly integrate an analysis of political, fragility, climate and other risks and assess the potential for reversion to emergency conditions. This implies accompanying the analysis with operational integration for the ability to flex, if conditions require, as part of risk-informed programming;

Action 4.2 Local capacity-building: UNICEF should build a cadre of first responders among partners at the country level, so that country programmes can flex from development to emergency action as conditions merit;

Action 4.3 Adaptive capacity: UNICEF should ensure that all PCAs include the scope for adaptation to emergency response, as part of preparedness.

5. Revisit the CCCs, which, in their current formulation, do not reflect the changing nature of humanitarian crises, and promote siloed rather than integrated responses.

Action 5.1 The CCCs could be revised to reflect the new challenges of humanitarian crises, such as migration and health emergencies, while promoting multisector responses, or they could be updated to include an addendum listing new challenges, setting integrated programming objectives and supplying an accompanying monitoring framework.

6. Accountability with flexibility

Performance monitoring of humanitarian action is a consistent challenge, yet the evaluations analysed here found considerable scope to improve the UNICEF monitoring of its own performance in emergencies, in line with recent internal efforts to strengthen HPM.[29]

Action 6.1 UNICEF should accelerate efforts to further integrate HPM with country-level monitoring systems to ensure that indicators express both global information needs and local realities;

[29] A full review of the Humanitarian Performance Monitoring approach in 2016, included in the synthesis of non-evaluative work, found similarly that HPM is often seen as being too rigid, separate from existing monitoring and evaluation systems at the country level and not always offering appropriate indicators. Its recommendations are presently being actioned by UNICEF.

Action 6.2 Under its HPM approach, UNICEF should prioritize extending the range of outcome indicators available to better reflect qualitative changes in conditions for affected populations as part of its accountability commitments.

7. Link programme integration to recovery

A more explicit and defined strategic overview within UNICEF humanitarian action is needed, firmly geared to resilience and transition goals. This should be linked to the revised CCCs.

Action 7.1 Collective planning is needed across programme areas, with multisector programming geared to the same intended goals of resilience and transition. Targets set should be high-level and overarching, rather than limited or sector-specific;

Action 7.2 Regional offices need to supply cross-sectoral, rather than programmatic, engagement with UNICEF country teams;

Action 7.3 UNICEF should better define its strategy for protracted emergencies, with a clear linkage to transition;

Action 7.4 The need for transition plans should be clearly defined and integrated within corporate guidance, recognizing different emergency types and the inevitable presence of protracted crises. All humanitarian responses should be designed and implemented with a clear view towards changing needs and evolving programme modalities, with transition integrated into the core of the UNICEF humanitarian programme cycle [30] and ethos.

[30] For details on the humanitarian programme cycle, see the Inter-Agency Standing Committee "Reference module for the implementation of the humanitarian programme cycle", available from https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/hpc_reference_module_2015_final_pdf.

Annex

Towards improved emergency responses: synthesis of UNICEF evaluations of humanitarian action 2010–2016

Due to space limitations, the text of the independent report entitled "Towards improved emergency responses: synthesis of UNICEF evaluations of humanitarian action 2010–2016" is not contained in the present annex. The report (83 pages) and a summary report (26 pages) are available from the UNICEF Evaluation Office website:

https://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_100819.html.